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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 GUANGZHOU 000452

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [CH](#)  
SUBJECT: Shenzhen Priest Finding Room for Faith

REF: A) Guangzhou 331, B) Guangzhou 412

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Classified By: Consul General Robert Goldberg; reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: Father Francis Xavier Zhang may have been a little surprised by how much more restrictive the environment for the Catholic Church was in Shenzhen than in Beijing, but that seems to have barely slowed him down. Seven months after his transfer here, he described several accomplishments in expanding the activities of his new church, which were achieved in part by developing a relationship with an initially suspicious and controlling government bureaucracy. Cautious about politically sensitive issues, he said he avoided public discussion of birth control and abortion, and called the situation in Tibet a "political, diplomatic and ethical" issue, not a religious one. On relations between Beijing and the Vatican, Zhang said that appointment of priests was an important issue but focused on the fact that the Holy See and the Chinese government are two very hierarchical organizations, both of which seek control over a unified Catholic Church in China. End Summary.

Local Authorities Yielding Space  
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12. (C) Father Francis Xavier Zhang (Zhang Tianlu) told the Consul General that since arriving in Shenzhen seven months ago, he has been able to find room to expand the activities of St. Anthony's Church, the city's only parish. After his transfer from Beijing, he found that the church was under tighter constraints in Shenzhen than in his old parish. He said that at first local officials were "very intrusive" and described his "overseer" from the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association in Shenzhen as very difficult at first. However, after months of working hard to improve relations with the local government and create an atmosphere of openness, Zhang said, the church had been allowed to expand its ministry.

13. (C) Zhang explained that he had been able to start a Sunday school for small children and create activities for older youth. The church had established 27 lay ministry groups engaged in activities that ranged from English lessons to Bible study. According to Zhang, the parish has also been active in social services that included raising money for victims of the Sichuan earthquake and winter storms as well as providing support for a leper colony in Huizhou run by nuns. In addition, the congregation has grown since Zhang's arrival. He said that he had performed 38 baptisms on Easter, will have another 100 by August and would likely have 100 more by Christmas. He believes the church will officiate over more than 300 baptisms for the year. Zhang also noted that he is talking with one of his parishioners about assisting with the formation of a Catholic businessmen's association.

Render to Beijing...  
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14. (C) Zhang's success in expanding the church's activities is likely due in part to his careful efforts not to publicly broach sensitive

political topics. When the Consul General asked how he handles issues like abortion and birth control, Zhang described the church's "outer court" and "inner court." He said that during mass, the "outer court," he focuses his sermon on the church's belief in the value of "life" while avoiding any specific mention of abortion and birth control. However, in confession, part of the "inner court," he instructs parishioners that the church does not condone these. He also noted that this was a very complicated issue in China, recognizing that parishioners must take into account legal, personal and religious implications in their decisions. On the government's actions in Tibet, Zhang said simply that it was a "political, diplomatic and ethical" question -- not a religious one. He does not comment on matters like this in public.

#### Vatican-Beijing Sticking Point - Church Unity

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15. (C) In describing the rift between the Vatican and Beijing, Zhang highlighted two issues of contention. First, he named control over the appointment of priests as an important issue. However, he focused in more detail on the existence of two separate Catholic churches in China -- the official church and the underground church -- as a stumbling block in the effort to improve relations. He described the Holy See and the Chinese government as two very hierarchical organizations. While the Chinese government ("one head, one shoulder") is purely a political organization, he said, the church is both political and religious ("one head, two shoulders"). Zhang, who long ago cast his lot with the official church, suggested that each sought to assert its control over a unified church in China. To underscore the lack of unity, he cited the example of a diocese in Jiangsu where priests from the official church and two separate underground churches were all vying for the post of bishop and had text messaged him to ask for his views (and perhaps implicitly for his support).

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16. (C) The Consul General pointed out that Pope Benedict XVI had emphasized the limits placed on the practice of religion in China as a central issue -- a point that had been made by the Bishop of Guangzhou, Joseph Gan, in an earlier meeting with the Consul General (ref B). However, Zhang seemed relatively unconcerned about this issue. He said the reality of this situation on the ground is "very complicated."

#### Rich, Materialistic Congregation

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17. (C) St. Anthony's congregation has about 3,000 members, according to Zhang. He said it was young with an average age of about 26 for new members, as befits a church that itself was just seven years old. He contrasted it with his previous church in Beijing, which he said was much more traditional. His parishioners are well off economically, he said, and live in a very materialistic environment in Shenzhen. Zhang suggested that this environment may help lead them to the church to find more meaning in life.

#### Doors Open to Foreigners

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18. (C) Zhang was confident and articulate during his meeting with the Consul General. He is clearly very comfortable dealing with foreigners. He noted that his church has 200 foreign members; he gives a bilingual mass in English and Chinese and is seeking permission from authorities to give an English mass as well. He seemed particularly proud to be traveling to Beijing for the Olympics, where he will be one of the religious figures celebrating church services for foreigners. He pointed out that he had suggested such services when China was awarded the 2008 Games as a way of dealing with the spiritual needs of believers. Father Zhang heartily expressed his enthusiasm at the prospect of future interaction with the Consulate and a barbeque at the Consul General's residence -- specifically asking that hot dogs be on the menu.

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